Arizona Ready (formerly Arizona's Education Reform Plan), which was adopted by Governor Brewer, is based on the recommendation of a statewide council of education and business leaders. One of the four main goals is significantly raising high school graduation from 73% in 2007 to 93% in 2020.

In order to meet this goal, Arizona needs to increase statewide graduation rates by a little over 1.5% per year. As can be seen in the graph below, that requires changing our historical trends.

High School 4 Year Graduation Rate
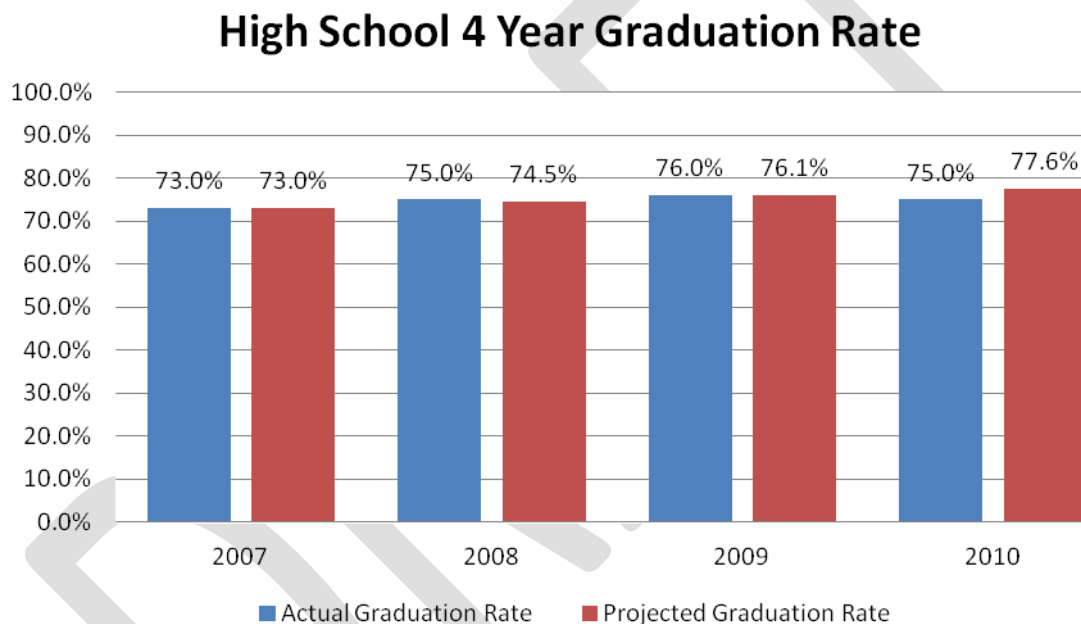
In the 2010 high school cohort only 75% of students statewide graduated on time. To be on track to the 93% goal in 2020, an additional 2.6% or 1,780 students would have needed to graduate.

Looking across the state, certain subpopulations of students are at greater risk of not meeting the 2020 graduation goal. These include Native American students, Hispanic students, and English Language Learning students. They have lower graduation rates and higher drop-out rates than the state averages for all students.

High School 4 Year Graduation Rate
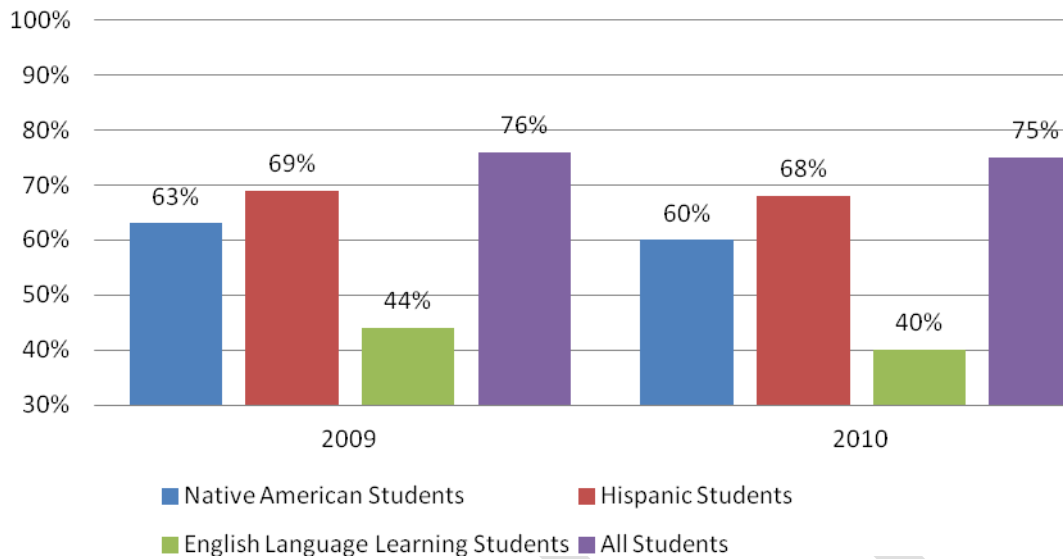
When disaggregated by County, a different pattern of performance can be seen in Apache, Greenlee, and La Paz counties.

High School 4 Year Graduation Rate for Hispanic Students
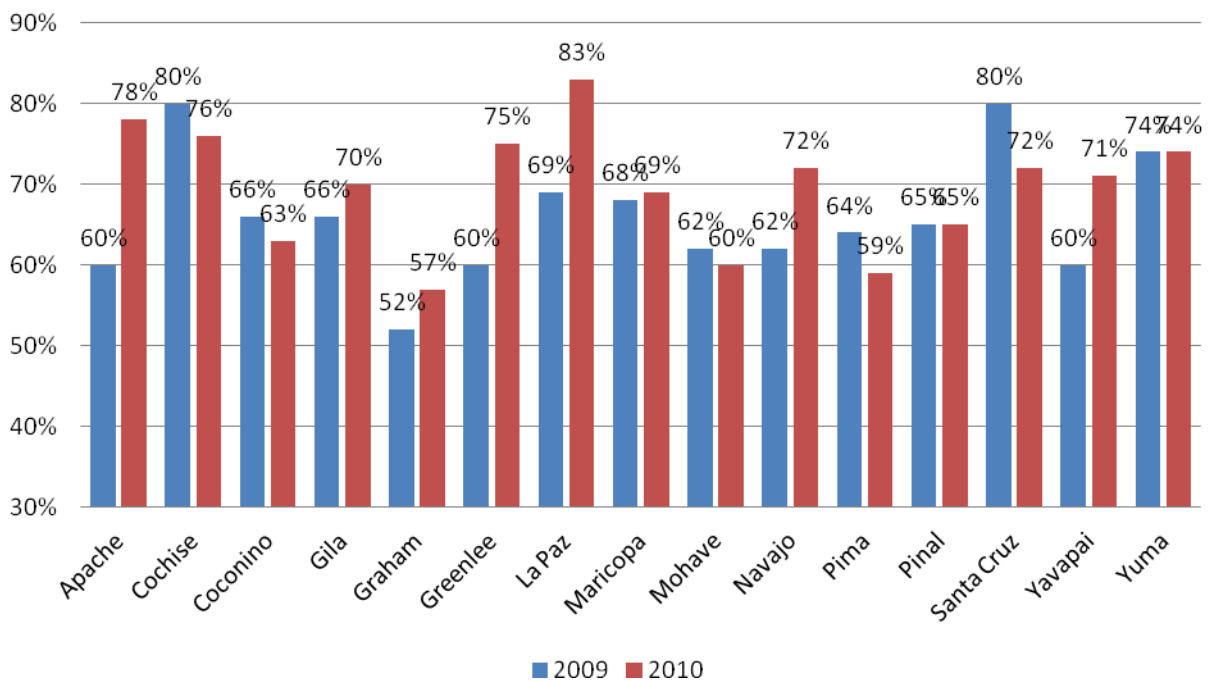
Based on these data, the Arizona Ready Education Council decided to move forward with a research project to identify why certain districts and schools outperform their peers while others struggle.

This research project will identify the best practices already in use in Arizona. The ultimate goal of this project is to ensure all schools have the information and resources necessary to succeed.

Once successful practices are identified, the next step is to ensure all schools have access to the information and resources necessary to adapt these practices to their own community. One successful framework for enabling communities to discover successful behaviors and strategies developed by their peers is Positive Deviance. Within the framework of Positive Deviance there are 5 basic steps.

1. Define: What is success?
2. Determine: Who are the successful members of the community?
3. Discover: What are these successful members of the community doing differently?
4. Design: How can these successful behaviors be adapted for all members of the community?

For this research project, success is defined as high school graduation in alignment with Arizona Ready's high school goal of 93% graduation by 2020. The successful member of the community will be identified using their historical graduation rates and they will be interviewed to identify what they are doing differently from struggling peers. Once these practices have been identified, all stakeholders will need to come together to design the next step of creating plans to adapt these identified practices to all schools.

Prior research on academic success in high school has made the following recommendations to improve graduation rates and decrease drop-out rates[1].

1. Focus on reading in early grades
2. Focus on chronic absenteeism in middle grades
3. Create new education options based on student and community needs and interest
4. Create graduation pathways and dropout recovery for over-age and under-credited youth
5. Connect the postsecondary completion agenda with high school graduation
6. Encourage community coalitions supporting graduation
7. Elicit perspectives of students, educators, and parents
8. Collect, analyze, and collaborate around timely and accurate data
9. Support teacher effectiveness
10. Develop parent engagement strategies

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[1] Literature found in the document "Must Read List" last presented at Arizona Ready Education Council meeting on 7/17/2012.

Several of the suggestions present in the literature are either in place or in progress at a state level in Arizona, but others are only possible at a district, school, or community level.

The first step for this research project is to identify the succeeding and struggling schools who will be our partners. Schools will be selected based on their 2009 – 2011 high school graduation rates. Succeeding schools will be those who are:

1. Graduating students at a higher rate than the county average for selected 3 student populations (outlined above) in 2011.
2. Making steady progress towards the 2020 statewide goal of 93% graduation across 2009 - 2011. (This is defined s the 1.5% per year the state requires to be on-track to its goal.)

Struggling schools will those who have:

1. Similar demographic profiles to selected succeeding schools.
2. Failure to make steady progress of 1.5% across 2009 – 2011.

A group of 3 – 4 succeeding schools will be selected by the task force based on school profiles to include:

1. Measures of early literacy (SAT10, AIMS)
2. Special Education Enrollment
3. Measures of 8th grade math literacy (SAT10, AIMS)
4. Chronic Absenteeism (absence rate)
5. Socio-Economic Census Measures (education level, single head of household, children living in poverty)
6. Beat the Odds Participation
7. CTE Offerings & Enrollment
8. ECAPs Implementation
9. ACT Performance
10. General AIMS Performance

Selected schools will be contacted and asked to make a commitment to participate in the full project, but will be free to stop participating at any time. Schools will not be identified by name in presented reports, but will be given anonymous designations.

In order to identify those practices in action at each school, a survey and interview methodology similar to that used in *Beat the Odds* will be used. Surveys and interviews with school administrators and teachers will center on the 10 recommendations identified in previous research, but will allow for identification of new factors. The purpose of the surveys and interviews will be two-fold:

1. To identify what school administrators and teachers feel is working at their school to increase graduation and decrease drop-out.
2. To identify the extent to which each of the 10 recommendations has been implemented at each school.

Interviews with students, if possible, will be similar to those used in *The Silent Epidemic* and will concentrate on students' perceptions of academic engagement, life/school balance, and personal trajectory. Students will be identified by working with school administrators and teachers to find student who are both succeeding beyond expectations and those who may be struggling. The purpose of the student interviews would be:

1. To identify the alignment between student and school perceptions of supports for struggling students.
2. To identify what students feel leads to success in high school.

Interviews will be conducted in person by teams of experts. These teams may include representatives with the following areas of expertise:

- Family Engagement
- Early Childhood
- Community Colleges
- JTED/CTE
- School Superintendent
- Parent Advocacy
- Business
- Legislative

Teams will not exceed 5 members and will be selected so that each member sees at least 2 schools. (This will ensure a degree of continuity to the team.) Teams will be selected based on the schools selected and areas the task force has identified as possible areas of investigation.